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The Classroom and the Community

Historic Preservation at George Washington University

Interaction with communities is not just a good idea in preservation education; it is an essential one. From the start, students must be aware of the fact that preservation is seldom, if ever, a viable activity without substantial community involvement. The most stringent, comprehensive ordinance, the most well-funded and equipped city preservation office, the richest array of historic resources mean little for protection purposes unless a critical mass of residents actively participates in the process. Building a constituency and working with it on an ongoing basis is vital if preservation is to have any impact on a community. Equally important, citizens should not rely on the leadership, or even always the wisdom, of government officials. Many cases exist where preservation has succeeded only because a strong-willed, well-informed, and politically savvy private sector has insisted high standards be applied to the tasks at hand.

As important as such endeavors are, the intricacies of community interaction are extremely difficult to teach. Strong arguments can be made for leaving this sphere of preservation training to internships and other experiences outside the classroom. Case studies may be examined in detail, but seminar discussions cannot begin to approximate the rough-and-tumble world of activism. Direct involvement in a case is problematic on several counts. Preservation initiatives cannot be scheduled at the convenience of the academic calendar. Frequently they last months or years longer than a single semester. Working on such projects may demand one's full attention, requiring that other obligations be put aside until an unexpected crisis is resolved. How can students effectively participate in such ventures without jeopardizing their grades? And what if a student, in the process of learning, does something impolitic or that in another way undermines a preservation effort months or years in the making?

Typical street in the Buckingham garden apartment complex, Arlington, Virginia.

At the same time, sidestepping community issues in a graduate program has serious drawbacks as well. Most internships do not focus on the salient issues at stake even when the job performed allows one to glean some understanding of the community's key role. The issues are critical to learn, for irrespective of what kind of work one pursues in preservation, having a clear sense of the community's vital contribution should be part of one's basic perspective on the field. Under the circumstances, these matters should be integral to many facets of the academic curriculum, complementing practical experiences gained outside the classroom.

Established in 1975, the Graduate Program in Historic Preservation at George Washington University has enjoyed the benefits of an institution that is centrally located in a major metropolitan area and that has a long tradition of community interaction. Furthermore, the program is based in the Department of American Studies, which, virtually from its inception, has nurtured ties to the public realm. Most preservation courses offered entail components that not only allow students to learn about the importance of the community's role, but also contribute to the community.

The tone is set at the beginning by a methods course required of all incoming students in the first semester. The focus of reading and classroom discussion is the preservation process, which includes analysis of the dynamics between public and private sectors at the local as well as at the national and state levels. After the first month, one meeting each week is given to a guest speaker, prominent in the field, for informal discussion of his/her current work. Complementing the national leaders are a number of distinguished local ones from both the

1950s aerial view of the Buckingham garden apartment complex, Arlington County, Virginia, begun in1937. Henry Wright, planner, Allan Kamstra and Albert Lueders, architects.

public and private spheres. The semester assignment introduces the students to the demands of preparing the nomination of a property to local and state historic registers and to the National Register of Historic Places and then requires the development of a realistic scenario of how the property selected might be protected were it threatened. This latter component, especially, necessitates understanding how government offices and citizens groups interact. The research conducted on the property is often used in subsequent preservation efforts.

Another required methods course, usually taken toward the end of enrollment, focuses on issues of community-based preservation. The class works as a group conducting an in-depth historic resources survey of a neighborhood in the metropolitan area. The criteria for selection include a precinct that is: reasonably typical of its place and time and thus representative of the mainstream of preservation efforts, a likely candidate for historic district designation, and a place whose residents are generally receptive to having the study conducted. Throughout the project, emphasis is placed on understanding the past rather than on advancing protective measures to underscore the importance of building a constituency before embarking on a regulatory agenda. The class works with local and state preservation offices, additional public agencies, civic groups, property owners, and others as well. At the semester's end, the class makes a public presentation in the community, some of which have been televised. The material—research papers, survey documentation, and final report—is given to an appropriate local repository. Besides heightening community awareness, these studies have in some cases led to concrete action, including drives to expand existing districts or to establish new ones. A thematic study of garden apartment complexes of the 1930s and early 1940s in Arlington County, Virginia, provided information that led to the designation of one of the most historically significant examples of the type.

Additional courses afford other opportunities. One devoted to on-site building documentation and analysis, conducted by Orlando Ridout V of the Maryland Historical Trust, yields detailed field notes and measured drawings of a property previously neglected. A course devoted to preservation planning and management, taught by Pat Tiller of the National Park Service, entails research assignments on the impact of preservation and of new development on communities of the metropolitan area. In the spring 1997 semester, this class examined the potential effect of proposed convention, entertainment, and museum facilities on the eastern part of downtown Washington, working with the Committee of 100 on the Federal City and other concerned groups. A course on the economics of preservation, taught by Richard Wagner, principal in a Baltimore architectural firm, requires detailed feasibility studies of buildings in the region, some of which have afforded a basis for their rehabilitation. Courses taught by Pamela Cressey, director of the Alexandria Archaeology Program, allow students the opportunity to become involved in one of the country's most innovative undertakings of its kind, where a public agency and citizens work hand-in-hand to discover and protect archeological resources.

The professionalization of preservation over the past quarter century has left a growing gap in the activist side. Too many people assume others will take care of problems. To drive home the crucial need for aggressive, intelligent, informed activism, a new course on the subject was inaugurated for the fall 1997 semester. Taught by Richard Striner, founder of a public policy institute in Washington and a veteran citizen activist in preservation, the course allows students to study the intricacies of the private sector's role and meet with a number of prominent figures in the region.

Such exposure to community needs in the classroom is far from a substitute for experience in the field. The curriculum nevertheless enables students to attain a reasonable exposure to this sphere and to work more effectively in or with the private-sector once they have completed the program. The community benefits too, both from information received and from insights on the many values of preservation.

Of course, the importance of public officials and others acting in a professional capacity should not be underestimated either. The accomplishments of preservation would be nowhere near what they are today were concerned lay persons the only participating party. The point is that both are necessary for success in the field.

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Photos courtesy the author.